

How Tamed Is Your Tongue?

“...but no one can tame the tongue - a restless evil, full of deadly poison.” James 3:8

James 3:1-12
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I suspect that all of you are familiar with the old saying, “see no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil.” This is most often portrayed with three monkeys, each covering either its eyes, or ears, or mouth. Now, as you and I go about our daily lives it's sometimes impossible to block out all that we see or all that we hear. What we have more control over is what we speak, the words that come out of our mouths.

Just imagine what kind of place the world would be if even for 24 hours everyone would speak no evil. Imagine what a difference that would make in our country, at work, at school, at home, even here at church. Imagine if in a 24-hour period everyone would use only life-giving words of affirmation and encouragement that build others up and heal emotional wounds, rather than words that tear down and inflict wounds.

As I mentioned in this morning's Time With the Children, we are all very aware that the old childhood saying, “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me” isn't really true. Yet, it is still an often-necessary stock response to verbal bullying. Saying that, **words can and often do inflict great harm**. I still remember particular words that caused me pain, especially as a kid in junior high. You, too, may have vivid memories of the times when you have been on the receiving end of harmful words. We tend to forget, however, the times when we were the ones *inflicting* the damaging words. Yet, at other times we may actually be unaware that what we have said has caused another person pain.

This is an important and tough issue to address. But address it we must, for the scriptures are filled with words of warning about the damage that is caused by the untamed tongue. The author of the New Testament Book of James, for instance, has a lot of wisdom to share on this subject. And he concedes the reality, “All of us make many mistakes” (v. 2).

James knows that small things can have a big impact. Size is not always the main measure of power and control. Using dynamic and vivid imagery, James says that the tongue is like a rudder on a boat, or a bridle bit in a horse's mouth - tiny by comparison with a ship or a horse, but yielding great control. So goes the rudder, so goes the ship; so goes the bridle bit, so goes the horse. That is the power, says James, of the tongue - small, often hidden from view, but yielding great power and control.

James also makes a similar analogy to fire. Huge and destructive fires often begin with just a small match, a carelessly tossed cigarette, or a single spark from a campfire. Never one to mince words, James writes, “**How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire! And the tongue is a fire**. It is a world of wrong, occupying its place in our bodies and spreading evil through our whole being. It sets on fire the entire course of our existence with the fire that comes to it from hell itself” (v. 6). I bet if James had children of his own they had their mouths washed out with soap on a regular basis. And not an Ivory or Dove kind of soap, but more like Lava Soap – remember that? (I remember a few intimate occasions with a bar of Lava.) Admittedly, harmful words sometimes come out of our

mouths unintentionally, not meant to sound as bad as they are. At other times, however, they are purposely malicious. Perhaps these intentionally harmful words are what James has in mind when he speaks of the tongue as “a restless evil, full of deadly poison” (v.8).

In today’s modern electronic world, harmful words are not only spoken but also written, especially in emails, text messages, and as we are all too familiar, tweets. So, I encourage you to re-read and think twice before you hit “Send,” just to check how your message might be perceived by the recipient. A re-write may be in order. And be cautious about being passive aggressive in print. Or, perhaps sleep on it and see how you feel about what you’ve written the next day.

James continues by saying that even though we, as humans, are able to tame every animal in creation (an intentional reference back to the creation story in Genesis), “no one can tame the tongue” (v. 8). Like so much else in the book of James, parallels to this passage can be found in Hebrew wisdom literature. The wisdom found in the Old Testament Book of Proverbs is a good example. For instance, from Chapter 16, “A perverse person spreads strife, and a gossip separates close friends” (v. 28). The actual Hebrew word translated here as ‘gossip’ (which is a fairly modern-day word) is more literally translated as a ‘whisperer.’

So yes, a particularly harmful use of words is indeed gossip. And the Bible has lots to say about that, like Proverbs 20:19, “A gossip reveals secrets; therefore, **do not associate with someone who talks too much.**” Around 200 years before the birth of Jesus a Jewish teacher in Jerusalem, named Ben Sira, wrote a book of wisdom literature that we call Sirach, or Ecclesiasticus (not to be confused with the Old Testament book of Ecclesiastes.) It is part of the Apocrypha, the biblical literature that’s included in the Catholic Bible, but not ours. Listen to these sayings, written over 2200 years ago, about the misuse of words:

- The blow of a whip raises a welt, but a blow of the tongue crushes the bones.
- Many have fallen by the edge of a sword, but not as many as have fallen because of the tongue.
- As you fence in your property with thorns, so make a door and a bolt for your mouth.

This last statement echoes the psalmist’s prayer in Psalm 141:3, “Set a guard over my mouth, O Lord; keep watch over the door of my lips.” What a great visual image, and what a great prayer! Let me share with you now some additional proverbs from a variety of countries around the world that I found in a book that I have entitled, *The Encyclopedia of World Proverbs*:

- *If the mouth is fastened shut, no quarrel arises.* - Japan
- *It is the mouth that cuts the throat.* - Africa (Hausa)
- *A wicked tongue is worse than an evil hand.* - Yiddish
- *Below the tongue, there is an ax hidden.* - Korea
- *Even four horses cannot pull back what the tongue has let go.* - Slovakia
- *The tongue is like a sharp knife; it kills without drawing blood.* - China

Please take notice there is a worship bulletin insert containing many Old and New Testament passages of wisdom warning us about the need to tame the tongue. You may want to put it on your refrigerator.

Another point that James makes is how *inconsistent* we are in our speech. He rightly believes that we speak with a forked tongue, speaking out of both sides of our mouth. He

states, "With the tongue we bless God, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God" (v. 9). **The very same gift of speech that enables us to praise God also enables us to curse our fellow human beings, who like ourselves, are made in God's image.** Such a contradiction ought not occur, but it does nevertheless. James' overall concern is that you and I as Christians – followers of the ways of Jesus - must learn to control our tongue, even though he acknowledges that it can not be completely tamed, and that we will make many mistakes.

So, what can we do in this regard? Here's a few suggestions. Perhaps **disconnecting the gossip hotline is the best place to start. We cannot always control when we hear gossip from another, but we do have control over whether or not we spread it any further.**

And heaven forbid that we should be the one to start it!

Yet, I also want to acknowledge that it is sometimes a difficult judgment call (even for pastors) to know when we cross the sometimes-fine line from simply sharing information out of concern for others, and gossiping about them. I think the difference goes back to our motivation, which we should always question. To help in this regard, I want to share a poem, of which you may be familiar, written way back in 1835 by **Beth Day**. It's entitled, "**Three Gates of Gold**," and it offers this wise suggestion:

Three Gates

If you are tempted to reveal
A tale to you someone has told
About another, make it pass,
Before you speak, three gates of gold.

These narrow gates: First, "Is it true?"
Then, "Is it needful?" In your mind
Give truthful answer. And the next
Is last and narrowest, "Is it kind?"

And if to reach your lips at last
It passes through these gateways three,
Then you may tell the tale, nor fear
What the result of speech may be.

Those three gates again: Is it true? Is it needed? Is it kind? I'm fond of another saying, "**Everyone you meet is struggling with something you know nothing about. Be kind!**" So, let us never be lulled into believing that our words don't matter – because they do – and often **there are consequences to pay for our untamed tongue!** That can range anywhere from hurt feelings to broken relationships to violence and much worse.

Remember, once spoken, words cannot be retrieved. Yet when we do misspeak, asking for forgiveness and hopefully working toward reconciliation, must always be our goal.

So, set a guard over our mouths, O Lord; keep watch over the door of our lips.

Amen.